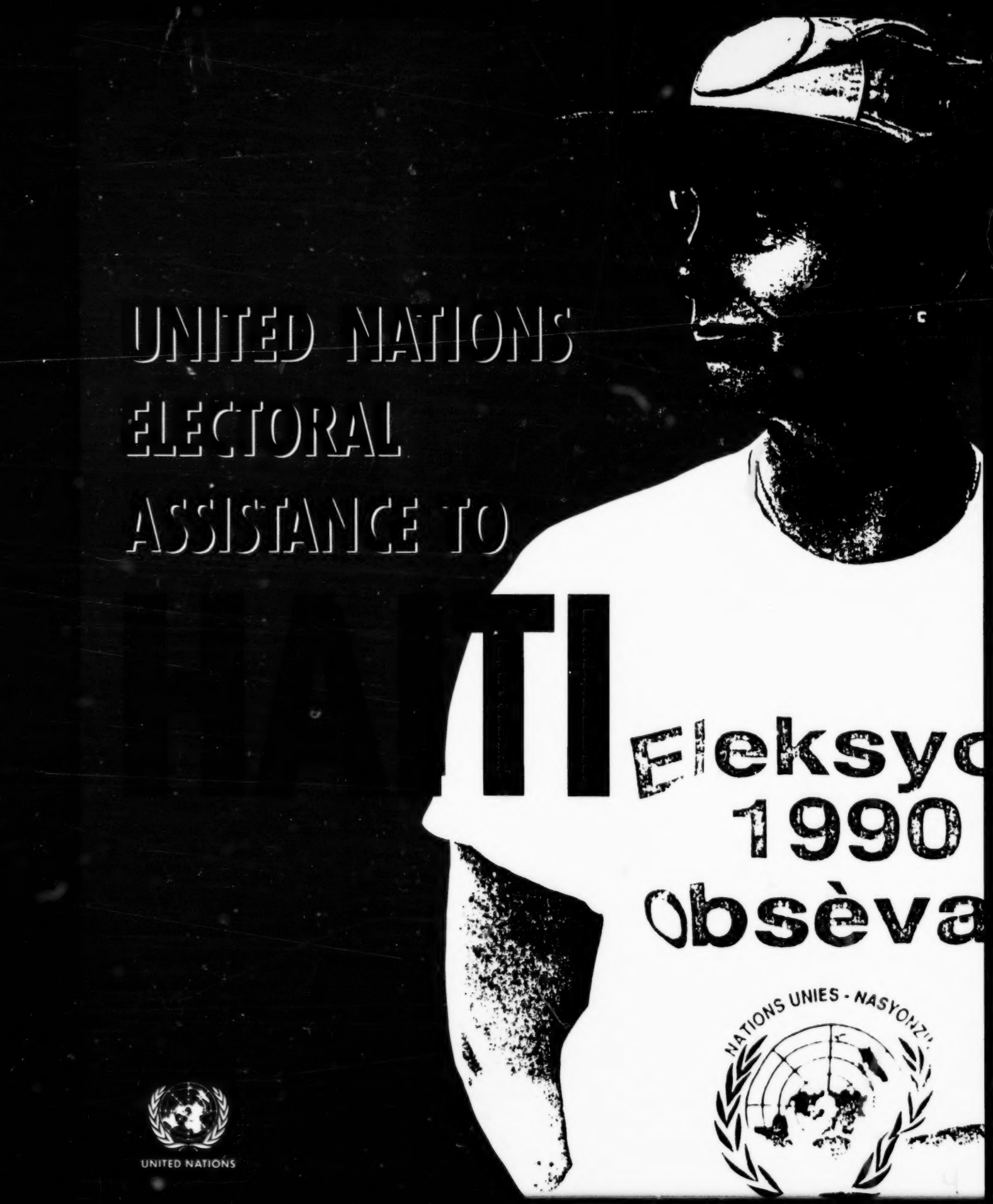
UNITED NATIONS ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE TO



UNITED NATIONS

Haiti's first democratically elected President took the oath of office on 7 February 1991 after an election which, in the words of the United Nations Secretary-General's Personal Representative for Haiti, had been highly successful. Several months before, the Provisional Government of Haiti had formally requested the United Nations to observe its electoral process. It had also asked for UN assistance in drawing up electoral security plans and in observing their implementation. These requests led to the establishment of the United Nations Observer Group for the Verification of the Elections in Haiti (ONUVEH).

This was the second time in its history that the United Nations responded to the express invitation of a sovereign State to observe its electoral process. The first time had been in Nicaragua, when, in the wider context of the regional peace process in Central America, UN observers were asked by the Nicaraguan Government to monitor the entire electoral process, beginning in August 1989 and culminating in the elections of 25 February 1990. The United Nations' mission in Haiti and in Nicaragua was to observe. In Namibia in 1989, by contrast, the United Nations, in the framework of a settlement plan approved by the Security Council, supervised and controlled the electoral process, playing a pivotal role in bringing Namibia to independence.*

A FORMAL REQUEST

Haiti's request to the United Nations for electoral assistance was one of the first acts of the Government of the Provisional President of Haiti, Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, who took office in March 1990. The request came at a time when the country remained in the grip of an apparently endemic political, economic, social and institutional crisis. The succession of governments after the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier were each the product of either a *coup d'état* or an election whose validity was questioned. To begin to provide a basis for solving the crisis, the Provisional Government identified the holding of free, fair and credible elections as a matter of top priority.

Following Haiti's request, and as an initial step, the United Nations, with financing provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), deployed a technical mission to Haiti in June 1990 to help establish a credible and honest electoral process through technical and practical advice, practical training measures and the exchange of experience with other developing countries. In addition, the Secretary-General, on 19 June, appointed João Augusto de Medicis as his Personal Representative for Haiti and asked him to further clarify the Haitian request. This clarification came in a series of letters to the Secretary-General from the Provisional President. On the basis of those letters and after extensive consultations among UN Member States, the General Assembly, on 10 October 1990, adopted by consensus its resolution 45/2, which asked the Secretary-General to provide the broadest possible support to the Government of Haiti in meeting its requests for electoral observers; for two or three security advisers to assist the Haitian Coordinating Committee for the Security of Electoral Activities; and for specialized observers with solid experience in the field of public order. In line with the Assembly's resolution, the Secretary-General established ONUVEH to provide that support. Haiti also asked the Organization of American States (OAS) and several non-governmental organizations to provide electoral observers. A system of informal cooperation was established among the groups.

ONUVEH

The ONUVEH mission was headed by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti. It included three divisions: a division for electoral observation, composed of a nucleus of 39 international staff, with the addition of a further 154 observers at the time of the elections themselves, some coming from the UN Secretariat, some being contributed by Governments and some being volunteers from UN agencies and non-governmental organizations working in Haiti; a division for security observation, consisting of 64 security experts

* For a fuller account, see "Election supervision: The UN experience in Namibia and Nicaragua" (DPI/1105–November 1990)

contributed by Governments, some of whom were temporarily reassigned from existing UN peace-keeping operations; and a division for administration. The men and women who served with ONUVEH, all of them volunteers, began arriving in Haiti immediately following the establishment of the mission. Teams of electoral observers and security observers were then deployed throughout the country, covering the nine departments. At the same time, ONUVEH established a country-wide communications network.

THE FIRST PHASE

The first task of ONUVEH was to help create a psychological climate conducive to the holding of democratic elections. ONUVEH electoral and security observers throughout the country established numerous contacts with the local authorities, particularly the electoral and military authorities, and with all sectors of society. ONUVEH observers explained that the purpose of their mission was to observe the electoral process as a whole, to ascertain that it was free and democratic and to report through the Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly. The observers took great care to dispel misunderstandings, particularly with regard to security. In this they were assisted by a radio and television campaign conducted by an ONUVEH information team. They also sought to assist coordination between the electoral authorities and the military authorities, in some cases taking the initiative of organizing meetings between the two.

Throughout the electoral process, the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and the chief electoral officer were in frequent contact with the Interim Electoral Council, the definitive Haitian electoral authority. They transmitted their concerns and made suggestions to ensure the proper conduct of the electoral process and facilitate ONUVEH's tasks. ONUVEH observed and analysed electoral operations as they unfolded. Observers inquired into difficulties encountered by the registration and polling stations in registering voters

and into irregularities reported to them. They attended political meetings held in their departments and monitored radio and television broadcasts to make sure that all candidates had equal access to the mass media.

Responsibility for electoral security lay exclusively with the Haitian Armed Forces. Nevertheless, in accordance with the request of the Haitian Government, the two ONUVEH security advisers established close ties with the senior officers on the Coordinating Committee and participated in all relevant preparatory work. Their activities culminated in the formulation of a national electoral security plan within days of the first round of the elections. ONUVEH security observers also had an important role to play, particularly by establishing relations of confidence with local military authorities responsible for drawing up and implementing the local security plans. The observers focused on identifying sensitive areas with a potential for conflict and, after gathering information on security problems that might require their attention, concentrated their efforts on those areas.

On the eve of the first round of the elections, ONUVEH reported that the electoral campaign and voter registration had taken place under favourable conditions. With one tragic exception, the first phase had been virtually violence-free. There had been complete freedom of expression, without restrictions on the broadcast media or press and with no reports by journalists of personal intimidation.

The fairness of the campaign was also evidenced by the impartiality of the Interim Electoral Council towards political figures, as well as by the impartiality of institutions such as the executive branch and the army. There was no abuse of State property in favour of any particular candidate. Although many candidates were rejected for failing to meet the formal requirements of a complex and strictly applied law, the candidates allowed to run for office represented the entire spectrum of the country's social and political life, incontestably enabling the Haitian people to make a genuine electoral choice in order freely to determine their future.

THE ELECTIONS

The first round of the elections was held on 16 December 1990. Haitian voters were asked to choose, by separate ballot, their president, legislative representatives and local officials. In cases where the required majority was not obtained, provision was made for a second round of elections, held on 20 January 1991.

When the polls opened at 6 a.m. on 16 December, 82 ONUVEH electoral observer teams began their visits to polling stations throughout the country, including those in the most remote and difficult areas. The core group of 39 electoral observers had been reinforced by 50 additional international staff from UN Headquarters and 35 observers designated by 13 Governments. They were

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joined by 31 staff members of UNDP and UN agencies in Haiti and 38 individuals from local non-governmental organizations operating in the area, bringing the total to 193 ONUVEH electoral observers, all of whom received specialist training. The security observers accompanied their Haitian counterparts on all their rounds throughout the day.

When the polls closed at 6 p.m., ONUVEH electoral observer teams had visited 1,813 polling stations in the nine departments, observing the voting process. About 10 per cent of these stations, located in areas of particular political sensitivity, were visited at the express request of the political parties or the Interim Electoral Council. In general, irregularities were minor and resulted from lack of experience or expertise or from logistical problems. ONUVEH detected no widespread effort to disrupt the elections, to intimidate voters or to falsify the process. The fairness of the electoral process was further assured by the presence at the polling stations of accredited observers from Haitian political parties. In a few areas, including some of the most densely populated districts of the capital city, voting could not begin as scheduled due to the late arrival of electoral material. This dangerous and potentially explosive situation was resolved later in the day, and violence was avoided through a constant dialogue between the security forces, the electoral authorities, the local population and the UN and other observers. With the arrival of the ballots, those who had been waiting to vote were given the opportunity to do so.

While cooperation among the various groups of international observers took place on an informal basis, ONUVEH and OAS coordinated their efforts in one operation known as the "quick count". Seventy-five ONUVEH teams and 75 OAS teams ended election day at 150 pre-selected sample points, where, when the polls closed, they observed the counting of the ballots and took note of the results of the presidential race. These results were communicated to ONUVEH headquarters, where by 10 p.m. ONUVEH election experts were able to project the outcome of the presidential election. Both the Interim Electoral Council and the principal presidential candidates were informed. The quick count technique was instrumental in assuring public confidence in the counting process and respect for the results of the presidential voting. Within the first few hours, ONUVEH had reliable and accurate information. This was particularly important in view of the fact that the Electoral Council announced the winner, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, only on 24 December. When the final results were released by the Council on 11 January, they showed that President-elect Aristide had won 67 per cent of the vote, a figure corresponding almost exactly to the ONUVEH projection.

ONUVEH concluded that the first round of elections had taken place without major incident and that the people of Haiti, for the first time in their history, had been able to participate in democratic elections, freely casting their ballots in conditions of security and without intimidation.

Satisfactory conditions prevailed as well during complementary legislative elections which took place in some districts on 6 January 1991 and during the second round of elections which took place in most districts on 20 January. Although turn-out was much lighter than in the first round, voters were again able to cast their ballots freely in conditions of security. During the second round, 48 teams of ONUVEH electoral observers visited about 10 per cent of the polling stations in the nine departments, concentrating their efforts on those locations

Photos by Milton Grant

where difficulties were thought most likely to arise. ONUVEH security observers were also deployed throughout the country, observing the implementation of security plans.

CONCLUSION

After Haiti sent its request for electoral assistance, many voices were raised—in Haiti and elsewhere—expressing doubts about the ability of a small number of electoral and security observers to influence events, and about the will of the Haitian army to guarantee security. Nevertheless, Haiti's Provisional Government had clearly indicated a desire for the assistance of the international community. The resulting response made Haitians keenly aware that the world wanted to help. Fifty different nationalities from five continents were represented in ONUVEH alone. In all, hundreds of observers from various groups came to Haiti at the invitation of the Provisional President or the Electoral Council to observe the elections.

ONUVEH's strength, and the success of the elections, came from two main sources: the psychological and moral force of the UN presence and the political will of Haitians at every level of society. Without the observers and their personal contact with the authorities and the public, the credibility and the security of the electoral process might not have been assured, particularly at times of crisis when tensions were running high. Without the necessary political will on the part of the Haitian authorities, and the commitment of the Haitian people to the elections, the political and logistical difficulties could not have been overcome.

ONUVEH introduced to the Haitian electoral process the expertise and commitment of its international staff. At the same time, the mandate of the mission was fully compatible with the sovereignty of the country. The balance between, on the one hand, ONUVEH's efforts to meet Haiti's needs and, on the other, respect for Haiti's sovereignty guided all the mission's activities. This was particularly important with regard to Haiti's request for advice in drawing up security plans and for help in observing their implementation, a request that was made to ONUVEH alone. The mission's security experts were active and visible but at the same time discreet, impartial and unarmed. Through their contacts at all levels, they served to bridge the gap between the army and the people, providing expertise and support to the military authorities at a time of profound change, while reassuring the population as it prepared to exercise its democratic rights.

In sum, it was a combination of factors—the courageous efforts of the Government and the electoral authorities, the exemplary role of the army, the enthusiasm and determination of the Haitian public, the assistance of ONUVEH and the commitment of the observers to a free, fair and secure electoral process—which set the stage for Haiti's first successful democratic elections held in conditions of tranquillity and liberty.

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